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What Monton Seems to Miss?

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Atheist philosopher Bradley Monton recently chronicled the harsh treatment he received — including the threat of legal action — from many of his fellow philosophers when he allowed that scientific evidence could, in principle, support Intelligent Design.¹ Monton argues that his proposition is defensible and robust from a philosophical perspective, and he provides an example to make his point: What if the fine structure constant, when measured in the future to a thousand significant digits, was found to be all zeros beyond the sixteenth digit? This would suggest a finite designer. As Monton explains, “The traditional God, being all-powerful, wouldn’t have the need to truncate the digits of the fine structure constant at 16. But if you’re an intelligent but finite computer programmer designing a universe, and you have to type in the value of one of the fundamental constants, you aren’t going to type forever — a natural thing to do would be to type some digits and then stop”. Satisfied with his defense, Monton concludes that although he finds no scientific evidence for design, “we should be open to the possibility that we get such evidence in the future. Moreover, there’s nothing intellectually or culturally wrong with being open to the possibility that we get such evidence in the future — there’s nothing wrong with seeking God in science. This is something that theists and atheists alike should be able to agree on”. But Monton’s defense

¹ Bradley MONTON, “How Can an Atheist Defend Intelligent Design?”, *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 2022, Vol. 19, No. 2, <https://doi.org/10.53763/fag.2022.19.2.202>.



will not satisfy his detractors. For although Monton has received harsh criticism from evolutionists, he has not understood it at a fundamental level.

According to Monton, the criticism he received is generally erroneous and the result of bad philosophy. In other words, his detractors are laboring under some rather basic misunderstanding, and his straightforward example of the fine structure constant should help to clear things up. But what Monton seems to miss is that the origins topic in general, and the random-chance-versus-design debate in particular, are long-standing and metaphysically laden with recurring theological themes and convictions. Yes, there certainly are basic misunderstandings along the way evinced by participants, but they are resting on strong, deeply held religious traditions.²

Monton has stepped into a complex arena. The harsh criticism he received was not merely a consequence of some basic misunderstandings. Monton ran afoul of many powerful and enduring religious traditions. Monton easily concludes that “there’s nothing wrong with seeking God in science”, but this is not at all obvious to many theists, and hypothetical examples of patterns in nature, such as Monton’s fine structure constant example, will not easily reverse this thinking. Importantly, Monton seems oblivious to how contemporary evolutionary theory entails and is mandated by such metaphysics.

Theology’s power and influence can be subtle. Consider even Monton’s fine structure constant example, which he proposes as a straightforward philosophical argument. Yet, as he explains, “[t]he traditional God, being all-powerful, wouldn’t have the need to truncate the digits of the fine structure constant at 16”. That is a theologically-laden claim, upon which his point rests.

Monton calls for theists and atheists alike to agree on his claim that science can, in principle, provide evidence for design. But at bottom this is not a disagreement between theists and atheists. This is a more nuanced, theologically-driven debate, reaching at least back to the Epicureans and Stoics in antiquity. Its resolution will first require recognizing these fundamentals.

Cornelius Hunter

² Cornelius HUNTER, “The Theological Structure of Evolutionary Theory”, *Religions* 2022, Vol. 13, No. 9, article number 774, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090774>.

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